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C O N F I D E N T I A L SANAA 003144

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [ER](#) [ET](#) [YM](#) [HOA](#)

SUBJECT: NEW CHAPTER IN YEMEN-ERITREA RELATIONS?

REF: SANAA 2942

Classified By: Ambassador Thomas C. Krajewski for reasons 1.4 b and d.

1. (SBU) Summary. The December 8-10 visit to Sanaa by Eritrean president Isayas Afewerki is being touted as marking "a new page" in Yemen-Eritrea relations. Since a fishing dispute over the Hunaish Islands erupted into armed conflict in 1995, Yemen-Eritrea relations have been icy. Although the dispute was resolved through international arbitration in favor of Yemen in 1998, the ROYG has viewed Eritrean motives in the Horn of Africa (HOA) with mistrust. During the visit, the two Presidents signed a fisheries agreement, held discussions on mutual security, and committed to signing eight additional cooperative agreements in Asmara in January. End Summary.

2. (U) At a December 10 joint press conference, President Saleh claimed Afewerki's trip was unrelated to the unconfirmed skirmish between the two countries in the waters of the Hunaish Islands several weeks earlier (reftel). Saleh told the press discussions with Afewerki focused on a new joint fisheries initiative and eight new bilateral agreements on investment, taxation, culture, trade and security. According to local press reports, the two Presidents had a closed-door meeting to discuss security and regional stability.

3. (U) In an interview with Eritrean TV, Saleh offered his services as go-between for Eritrea and Ethiopia saying, "I do not call myself a mediator, but I am ready to help the two sides." The next step in improving relations will be the January "Sanaa Gathering" meeting in Khartoum to be attended by Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan. (Note: Saleh stated that the Sanaa Gathering is not against Eritrea but an economic meeting open to all. In statements following the last gathering meeting in December of 2003, the Eritrea Government said the gathering "aims to asphyxiate Eritrea." End Note.)

4. (C) Comment. Afewerki's visit was scheduled on the heels of a November 21 incident during which the ROYG fired shots at an alleged Eritrean vessel that entered Yemeni territorial waters of the Hunaish Islands (reftel). Immediately following the incident, Ambassador was called in by Vice President Hadi who requested U.S. Forces in HOA share any information they might have collected on the alleged Eritrean vessel, as well as on a possible Eritrean Naval buildup. The timing of the Eritrean President's visit to Sanaa was likely no accident. It may signal recognition by both sides that confidence-building measures are called for to prevent future maritime incidents from escalating unnecessarily. End Comment.
KRAJESKI